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# Passing Class Notes

**Jack Jackson**

*This essay considers acts and representations of “passing” across boundaries of race, sex, gender, and sexuality as productive for queer theory and politics. Looking at classic literary texts of racial passing and narratives of transgender passing, the essay seeks to bring elements of class and materiality in these boundary crossings to the fore. A close reading of these texts on “passing” will highlight the material and class elements in performances and readings of sex, sexuality, gender, and race. And as “passing” has become a primary site and source of queer theory, queer politics and theory must therefore deepen their engagement with class analysis without being fully encircled by it.*

**Key Words:** Class, Culture, Intersectionality, Passing, Queer Theory

## 1

The concept and practice of “passing” has been a primary object of, and a rich incitement for, queer theory and politics because it has been central to queer life, existence, and survival. Passing is a demand of identity; or more precisely, the laws and norms of privileged identities (those identities that have often magically had no identity) draw the lines and boundaries that demarcate and police that privilege. If “the closet” represented the enforced and violent privacy of and against sexual minorities in the United States during the twentieth century, then passing constituted the required decorum and rules of that regime in the public realm. Passing into the public, from either the home or the sexual ghetto, required passing as the sexual norm while in public. Society would not compel a public confession, and the sexual deviant would not offer one.<sup>1</sup> But not telling was always telling something; silence stood as a false confession. And thus the political ambiguity surrounding passing: it was a logical mechanism of survival in an order that simultaneously thrived upon that very wager of survivability. This is why today we rightly celebrate those who

1. Foucault’s often cited declaration that “Western man has become a confessing animal” has at times obscured his related observation that the sprawling discourses that have arisen around sexuality and its misfits are also constitutive of regimes of policing and exclusion, a policing that has not always silenced but has in fact demarcated the when and where of speaking: “A policing of sex: that is, not the rigor of a taboo, but the necessity of regulating sex through useful and public discourses” and silences “are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (Foucault 1978, 25, 27). In the 1980s, ACT UP did not mobilize politically around the slogan “Silence = Death” for nonsensical or misguided reasons.

refused this wager because of what can only be called—must truly be called—their courage.

Converging with and supplementing the politics of the closet, passing has served as a flashpoint for other queer political and theoretical investments. The capacity to cross boundaries could demonstrate the political contingencies of (sexed, sexual, and/or gendered) boundaries that had been conceived as biological and ontological fixities: passing stood as an indictment of essentialism. In addition to politicization, passing has sometimes functioned as a *per se* good in that the pleasure of transgression stood as a virtue divorced from its particular utility. Passing also has opened up and nurtured spaces between binarized identities—identitarian pairings such as heterosexual/homosexual and man/woman—and thus has promised the proliferation of radical difference, potentially portending the dissolution of hierarchical values and practices derived from a dominant/subordinate ordering of identity. In queer theory, the political potential of deconstruction has always been most ripe.

Those who cross boundaries of sexual and gender identity today are not the first to wrestle with political ambiguities. As Kenji Yoshino (2006, 72) correctly observes, “The primary historical association of the word ‘passing’ has been with race,” beginning with the “antebellum practice of slaves passing as white.” Racial passing produced its own rich literature and fraught politics. After the formal abolition of slavery, passing could be a means for some to escape from the daily socioeconomic viciousness of Jim Crow apartheid and to grasp otherwise unattainable individual economic and educational opportunities. Crossing the “color line” (DuBois 1903) could also be considered a form of race treason as narrow self-interest trumped the collective struggle for emancipation. Alternatively, public narratives and confessions of passing unsettled biological racisms and generated the opportunity to “thematize the willful ignorance and blindness informing racial segregation by exploring how racial stigmas were not founded in the ‘natural’ superiority or inferiority of the races but rather constructed through historical prejudices and arbitrary (often illusory) social distinctions” (Blackmer 1998, 99). Passing, by definition, makes a mockery of bio-ontological tales of destiny and determination.

Unsurprisingly, contemporary queer readings and theorizations of passing have drawn upon earlier examples of racial passing, especially the celebrated cultural texts dealing with racial passing that were produced around the time of the Harlem Renaissance. Scholarly work in recent decades has produced increasingly well-traveled paths between these two distinct historical and political moments. The traffic is two-way: racial passing from the past is brought forward to inform and illuminate a queer present, and queer theory is taken back in time to reread what had previously been considered nonqueer texts on race. As examples, Judith Butler (1993) turned to Nella Larsen’s classic, *Passing*, to reconceptualize feminist understandings of sexed (and raced) bodies; Deborah McDowell (1993) mobilized queer theory to unearth the hidden currents of forbidden sexualities in earlier texts of racial passing; theorists of bisexual fluidity attempted to situate the politics of that fluidity within a genealogy that traces back, however unevenly, to accounts of racial passing in the early twentieth century (Lingel 2009); gay legal theorists concerned with the harms done to gays and lesbians who are compelled to pass as straight identified the originary violence of passing with the “social death” of passing across racial lines (Yoshino 2006); and

Siobhan Somerville (2000) masterfully mapped the intertwined scientific and cultural production/invention of sexual and racial identities at the beginning of the last century and, as illustration, offered “queer” readings of passing in novels like *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.

This essay will consider the queer politics of passing through an exploration of passing narratives in two historical epochs and across two primary identitarian lines: race in the early twentieth century and gender in the late twentieth century. More precisely, this essay engages with two classic and paradigmatic texts of racial passing—James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Nella Larsen’s *Passing*—and two landmark texts about gender passing—Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* and the documentary film directed by Susan Muska and Gréta Olafsdóttir, *The Brandon Teena Story*. Theory should embrace mobility (between texts, time periods, traditional genres of knowledge), as mobility is the multiplication of perspective, and a kaleidoscope of perspective disrupts the temptation for singular political subjects or horizons. The very act of passing teaches this lesson, although a certain kind of singularity has been imposed upon the texts I want to consider: they are too often and too quickly reduced to being only about race or gender. In fact, these are class texts, too.

The aim here is to rethink the conceptual unities born of singularity by considering what differences radiate within and across them, with a specific focus on the operation of class in these texts on passing and in the formation of related politicized identities. To the extent that queer theory and practice is understood as the embrace of “fluid, partial, and contingent notions of selfhood and alliance” (Green 2002, 141), these readings of passing also work to rethink and reimagine class within contemporary queer politics.

The effort to read these texts on passing as passing for something else—that is, as not exhausted by unmodified or undifferentiated “race” or “gender”—follows the lead of Deborah McDowell, who argues that Nella Larsen’s *Passing* must be read as a text whose “truth” is one not so much of racial passing but rather the mobilization of a “safe” narrative of racial passing that masks a far more dangerous and clandestine same-sex desire in the novel. She reads a novel supposedly centered on racial identity as instead being organized through the logic of sexual identity and desire:<sup>2</sup>

The idea of bringing sexual attraction between two women to full narrative expression is, likewise, too dangerous a move, which helps explain why critics have missed this aspect of the novel. Larsen’s clever narrative strategies almost conceal it. In *Passing* she uses a technique found commonly in narratives by Afro-American and women novelists with a dangerous story to tell: “safe” themes, plots, and conventions are used as protective cover underneath which lie more dangerous subplots. (McDowell 1993, 623-4)

2. Again, on the intertwined production of racial and sexual differences in the United States, see Somerville (2000). Likewise, Reddy (2011) has made the argument that, in our contemporary political moment, gay-rights liberalism works to conserve racial capitalism.

Unlike McDowell, however, I do not claim that narratives of race, sex, and gender obscure or cover up a deeper and truer meaning in the texts. No claim is made here that lurking underneath the surface of these various texts is the real story, the truth of the matter, the reality of class differences and antagonisms. In bringing class to the fore of analysis, one must remain vigilant against the temptation of any reading that sees race, gender, and sexuality as distractions from the real story of class exploitation. By insisting on hovering over the question of class in order to rethink and push against the conceptual unities of race, gender, and sexuality, we need not privilege class as the primary analytic matrix for either reading texts or organizing politics.

More to the point, problematizing conceptual unities (of literary genres, of politicized identities, of social movements) via a class analysis must always necessarily be turned against class analysis itself. But if claims to textual truth or identitarian privilege are jettisoned, on what ground is the move to a class-centered reading legitimated? The desire to bring class back in—or if not back in then at least to render it more prominent—rests on a discomfort with the sometimes absent, oftentimes insufficient attention to class analysis in critical discourses on gender, sexuality, and race. It is troubling, for instance, when queer theorists critique sexual-harassment laws in the name of a queer politics of pleasure but leave depoliticized the radically hierarchical and exploitative nature of the capitalist workplace as a site of economic production.<sup>3</sup> Equally telling is the academy's will and ability to organize and expand new forms of knowledge around race and gender but not around labor and class. In the field of U.S. jurisprudence, equality-based claims about harms resulting from race, gender, and (increasingly) sexuality discrimination are finding recognition and a foothold, whereas class remains juridically noncognizable.<sup>4</sup> And intersectionality theory, despite its promise and ambition, has frequently demonstrated an interest "in one particular intersection: the intersection of race and gender" (Nash 2008, 2). A lack in the recognition of and the concomitant atrophied resistance to class forms and class power in the United States struck me recently when I reread Angela Davis's (1981) *Women, Race, and Class*, a text whose exceptionality still highlights the general rule. Opening the book to the copyright page, one notices the method of categorization used by the Library of Congress. It includes the following: "i. Racism—United States; ii. Sexism—United States; iii. United States—economic conditions."<sup>5</sup> The terms "racism" and "sexism" function by their very definition to identify and challenge unjust racialized and sexed formations, whereas for class there is only the

3. For an example of this failure, see Halley (2002). At the same time (and from the other direction), to imagine labor as undifferentiated—or more precisely, to imagine political identities as reducible to labor—ignores the way that sexuality, gender, race, and nationality constitute the very nature of the workplace, as well as the fact that a socialist reorganization or Marxist abolition of the capitalist workplace could easily leave untouched the vocabularies and practices of subordination along other lines. A leftist contempt for "identity politics" blossomed in the late 1990s in spite of this elementary fact (see Gitlin 1996; Rorty 1998). One must wonder if the roots of that antagonism do not reach back to the *Communist Manifesto* and to the joy with which capitalism's radical dissolution of all borders and boundaries was greeted.

4. See *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* (1973).

5. A somewhat analogous point is made by Williams (1991, 256).

all-too-familiar and (seemingly) apolitical “economic conditions.” This categorization is symptomatic of that which prompts this essay.

## 2

How are we to understand class and its operation with race and gender, generally, and in the works of Larsen, Johnson, Feinberg, and Muska and Olafsdóttir, specifically? May we simply note that racially subordinated positions also bear the weight of class inequality? This suggests the operation of two quite separate logics of domination. But Judith Butler (1993, 168) rightly warns against such a move in an equivalent context: “Though there are clearly good historical reasons for keeping ‘race’ and ‘sexuality’ as separate analytic spheres, there are also quite pressing and significant historical reasons for asking how and where we might read not only their convergence, but the sites at which the one cannot be constituted save through the other.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, rather than thinking of class as something that is added to “race” or “gender,” it must be asked to what extent racial and gender identities are constituted through class (and vice versa): that is, to what extent are these identities *lived* through modalities of class?<sup>7</sup> Further, to what extent do class differences or antagonisms not only situate the black experience vis-à-vis white America but also render differences and antagonisms within African American communities?<sup>8</sup> To what extent is the particularity of gendered performance made possible by and legible through material realities and class-based norms? And to what extent does this introduction of particularity suggest not only the co-constitutive aspects of class with race and with gender but also, and perhaps simultaneously, the codissolutive aspects as well?

Nella Larsen’s (1997, back cover) *Passing* is a book about “shifting racial and sexual boundaries” that begins with neither race nor sexuality but rather with class. Or more precisely, artifacts of class conjure up images of race. The novel commences with the arrival of a letter written to the novel’s protagonist, Irene Redfield. The letter is exquisite and refined; it is no simple parcel, no bare economy of communication: “It was the last letter in Irene Redfield’s little pile of morning mail ... the long envelope of thin Italian paper ... with purple ink ... foreign paper of extraordinary size” (9). The reader is brought into a rarified socioeconomic cultural milieu with this letter, which marks its sender, Clare Kendry, who is immediately conjured up in the memory of Irene:

6. Butler (1993, 168) continues: “This is something other than juxtaposing distinct spheres of power, subordination, agency, historicity, and something other than a list of attributes separated by those proverbial commas (gender, sexuality, race, class), that usually mean that we have not yet figured out how to think the relations we seek to mark.”

7. As Robin D. G. Kelley (1997) has argued, “Class is lived through race and gender. There is no universal class identity, just as there is no universal racial or gender or sexual identity.”

8. In thinking of an African American “community,” it is worth bearing in mind the historical-geographic realities of American life under the Jim Crow regime of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. We can distinguish between historical specification and conceptual reification when we speak of collective political subjectivities. Today, the lesbian and gay “community” is beginning to unwind and re-collect along different lines of identity and political commitment, as the historical regime of formal inequality and social marginality disintegrates.

first from the depths of childhood as “a pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa” and then more recently from a chance meeting of the two in Chicago. The constituent accessories of class (fine Italian stationery) and the gradations of race (the phenotype of the light-skinned child) are thus linked on the first page and in the first instance.

This swirling of color-caste and socioeconomic class accelerates as we move deeper into the novel. As noted, the arrival of the letter from Clare Kendry sparks a recollection by Irene of an unexpected encounter with Clare in Chicago. Irene, who is not “visible as a Negro,” not when “alone,” is alone and shopping in Chicago when the heat of the city begins to overwhelm her (Larsen 1997, 16). The democratic crush of the hot street is too much: “She edged her way out of the crowd, feeling disagreeably damp and sticky and soiled from contact with so many other sweating bodies” (12). To escape the plebian throng, she ducks into the posh Drayton Hotel for some tea. She ascends to the café atop the Drayton, a place that is “like another world, pleasant, quiet, strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below” (13).<sup>9</sup> It is a racially segregated world that Irene inhabits, during the height of state-sanctioned racial apartheid in the United States, the era of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and its progeny. Danger exists for Irene upon entering into this other world: the danger of exposure, of being rendered publicly visible “as a Negro” in this officially “white” space, of suffering the wound of public subordination: “It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it, that disturbed her” (16).

We might read this scene as simply the crossing of the color line for material benefit, and we might therefore locate passing “within the discourse of intersectionality,” where passing is seen as “generally motivated by class considerations (people pass primarily in order to partake of the wider opportunities available to those in power)” (Smith 2001, 189). But this is too blunt of a reading. It suggests the possible reduction of human motive, desire, and action into some form of hyperindividualized cost-benefit calculus.

Economic necessity certainly *might* be a driving force in particular instances of passing. For example, critical race theorist Cheryl Harris (1995, 276) describes the choice her grandmother made during the 1930s: “Trapped on the fringes of economic marginality, she [her grandmother] took one hard look at her choices and presented herself for employment at a major retail store in Chicago’s central business district ... she was presenting herself as a white woman. In the parlance of racist America she was ‘passing.’” But we must immediately imagine the possible meeting in Chicago of Harris’s grandmother and the fictional character Irene Redfield. Or more exactly, we must imagine the extent of the *impossibility* of the meeting of these two women, who are “passing” in and through Chicago.<sup>10</sup> And in imagining that potential impossibility, one begins to open up the problem of locating passing in a simple discourse of intersectionality where people pass in order to seize material opportunities.

9. The class symbolism of the Drayton is even more apparent given that this fictional place is modeled on actual hotels at the “Gold Coast” end of Michigan Avenue in Chicago.

10. Obviously, a fictional character and a real person could not meet anywhere; this literal point should not obscure the political one.

For the protagonist of Larsen's *Passing* does not live on the fringes of economic life in America. Irene Redfield is the upper-middle- to upper-class wife of a black doctor in New York City. And thus, while she "passes" across the color line by entering into the Drayton Hotel, she does not do so for reasons of economic mobility and ascent. In fact, here the passing move is very much a horizontal one from the world of the black elite into the world of the white elite. And in her desire to escape that mass of soiled bodies on the street, the "sizzling below," her passing emanates from—at least in part—a desire to *maintain* a class power she inhabits rather than necessarily to seek entrée into a realm whereby her powerlessness is transformed into its antithesis. As Irene says, "I don't believe I've ever gone native [i.e., 'passed'] in my life except for the sake of convenience" (Larsen 1997, 100). This class positioning affects, in a lived and real sense, one's racial experience. That is, Cheryl Harris's grandmother faced the potential of economic degradation and rank poverty (at minimum) if her "passing" was discovered by her employers, whereas Irene Redfield by contrast would have encountered a "polite and tactful" ejection from the Drayton. Thus, this moment of racial commonality is also (at the same instant) a moment pregnant with future class antagonisms, when the binding agent of commonality dissolves or recedes.

The intersectionality thesis also wrongly posits the existence of too crisp a divide between those in power and those out of power. This is not unrelated to the marginality of class even in intersectional texts that claim to be "mapping the margins."<sup>11</sup> It is an ironic theoretical failure given that, "while intersectionality has worked to disrupt cumulative approaches to identity (i.e., race + gender + sexuality + class = complex identity) ... intersectional projects [nonetheless] often replicate precisely the approaches they critique" (Nash 2008, 6). For example, the Drayton Hotel is clearly a legally and culturally "white" space, but to interpret it this way is to signal that all whites therefore have the "power" of inhabiting it or that the "power" that comes from inhabiting it is to elide class stratifications and demarcations coursing through the imagined "white community." Similarly, while Irene Redfield is interpellated through a racial order that is subordinating, and though we see an instance of this in the scene at the Drayton, we must not see her as therefore having run out of or being without power. Again, this act of passing by Irene, in the name of "convenience," is predicated upon her *class* power and privilege (itself intertwined with the lightness of her skin). Likewise, the department store where Cheryl Harris's (1995, 276) grandmother worked was both a raced and classed space: "No one at her job ever asked if she was black; the question was unthinkable. By virtue of the employment practices of the 'fine establishment' in which she worked, she could not have been. Catering to the upper middle class, understated tastes required that blacks not be allowed." This sentence incorporates whiteness into "upper middle class" in a way that reads whiteness as upper middle class and thus views blackness as signaling by definition some other subordinated class position. Such a move misses the complicated ways that these two interlinked logics unfold.

11. Crenshaw (1991, 1243) allows for class to inform the analysis at times, but the central focus is on "intersecting patterns of racism and sexism." Class falls to the margin even as margins are being mapped.

The world Irene Redfield inhabits exists in the space of this unfolding. The unnamed protagonist of James Weldon Johnson's (1990) *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* offers the reader another clear portrait of this world. The "perfect little aristocrat" (4) is of the "best blood of the South" (12), as his father is a wealthy man of the white Southern aristocracy. Soon after his birth, he and his mother are sent north to Connecticut and live in middle-class comfort with the hushed financial support of his father. His mother is African American and had been a "sewing girl" to his father's mother, a fact which he does not learn until he is nine years old, after experiencing a racist taunting at his school. Upon his mother's death on the eve of his first year of college, he decides to head back to the region of his birth, the American South.

First he travels to the Atlanta University Center to attend school, but he is robbed of all his savings within a few days of his arrival. He then moves to Jacksonville, Florida, to look for work. Despite his new poverty as a low-wage laborer, he "became acquainted with the best class of colored people in Jacksonville. This was really my entrance into the race" (Johnson 1990, 54). The "race" is categorized into three classes: at the bottom is the desperate class of "ex-convicts and bar-room loafers" as well as the "men who work in the lumber and turpentine camps;" above them reside "servants, washerwomen, waiters, cooks, coachmen" and other members of the servant class; last, and at the pinnacle, one finds the "well-to-do and educated colored people" (56-7). For the narrator, one of the tragic dimensions of Jim Crow race relations is the inability of the latter class to be fully visible in American society. Instead, this class is lumped together with those consigned to the bottom of ranked social distinctions. Reflecting upon segregation in rail travel, the narrator confesses that, "odd as it may sound, refined colored people get no more pleasure out of riding with offensive Negroes than anyone else would get" (59). William Andrews (1990, xxi) writes that the narrator "of the *Autobiography* begins to realize in his early manhood that class, not race; acquired anxieties, not natural antipathies, lie at the heart of the ideology of white supremacy." In fact, race and class lie at the heart of the ideology of white supremacy.

It is the "best class" through which race is entered and lived for the narrators in both *Passing* and the *Autobiography*. This class lives "in a world of their own," a world of "social circles that are extended throughout the country," a world where a person in "good standing in one city is readily accepted in another." They have their "dances and dinners and card parties, their musicals and literary society." The women "attend social affairs dressed in good taste, the men in dress suits which they own" (Johnson 1990, 57-60). As cross-textual example, the final scenes of *Passing* transpire at a Negro Welfare League dance, where we find Irene wearing a "rose-coloured chiffon frock" and Clare sporting a "stately gown of shining black taffeta" (Larsen 1997, 74). In short, the "best" of the race circulates in a world above those in the sizzling streets below that are occupied by the likes of Cheryl Harris's grandmother. And the operative word is *above*: these are not simply different worlds, but rather worlds coupled together through relations of hierarchy and exploitation. The "security of place" that Irene so treasures, her place in the best of the race, rests upon the backs of the laboring servant class. Irene's servant, Zulena—a "small mahogany-coloured creature" (54)—does not speak or act or feel or think as

a character in the novel.<sup>12</sup> She is but another accessory in Irene's house, like a German teapot or fine china. The servant who "materialized silently in the doorway" remains just that, even when speaking ever so briefly: silent (68). She is given words, but not speech; she possesses no depth of character, no capacity to express feelings or desires of her own, and is instead reduced to being a possession. And this servant class bears the contempt of the "best" in addition to its imposed silence, both of which are born of class inequality: "Here I saw a street crowded with them. They filled the streets and thronged the sidewalks... they were of the lower class... the unkempt appearance, the shambling, slouching gait and loud talk and laughter of these people aroused in me a feeling of almost repulsion" (Johnson 1990, 40). This repulsion powers the undoing of any analysis that flattens raced experience into a monolithic and coherent unity that can then be intersected by other such unities. If racism undoes class solidarity, then class power undoes racial solidarity, even as each is lived through the other in these texts.

## 3

In representations of (trans)gender passing experiences, class is often overlooked even when explicitly visible, and sex, sexuality, and gender are given primary billing instead. The publisher of Leslie Feinberg's (1993) novel *Stone Butch Blues* asks on the book's back cover, "Woman or man? That's the question that rages like a storm around Jess Goldberg, clouding her life and identity." But to understand the life and identity of Jess Goldberg and the "woman or man" question that Goldberg navigates requires that class be placed at the fore.

Goldberg grows up in post-World War II America, on the grounds of a former Army barracks. All of the fathers work in the same factory, and the family is described as "Jewish and working class" (40). Goldberg's life choices are very much structured by the conditions of the working-class family. Goldberg announces in high school, "I'm going into the factories... I can't afford college" (45). This movement into the laboring world of factory work is facilitated by Goldberg's entrance into the world of queer bars in upstate New York and by self-identification as a "butch" within that community. "It was time for me to find a factory job. The butches urged me to try and get steel or auto... In the meantime, while I was waiting for an opening, the [temp] agency sent me to a one-day job on the loading docks of a frozen food plant

12. The pointed observation of the servant's color suggests the circulation of whiteness' value within the African American community itself, as a marker of class power and privilege. Allyson Hobbs' (Hobbs 2014, 73) recent history of passing describes the emergence in the late nineteenth century of a "visible, well-educated, and economically ascendant class of light-skinned black elites" who "perceived themselves as vastly different from the black masses, particularly in terms of class, cultivation, and color." Whatever truth exists in this general schematic of lightness and class, Larsen's (1997, 37) novel is a reminder of how many accumulated countervaluations served to disrupt it, for Irene Redfield's prominent physician husband was "dark" and "couldn't exactly 'pass.'" Additionally, in response to a friend's casual remark that "of course, nobody wants a dark child," Irene "said in a voice of whose even tones she was proud: 'One of my boys is dark'" (36).

... Unloading trucks on the docks was male turf" (75).<sup>13</sup> The docks may indeed be male turf, but then so are the boardrooms of most multinational corporations, and it is almost impossible to imagine older butches suggesting to young butches that they go find work there. So it is a classed masculinity being performed, inhabited, and reworked. Here, passing doesn't flee the "truth" of identity in the hope of economic benefit; rather, specific economic opportunity—opportunity for laboring physicality—facilitates passing into a new truth altogether.

This supports Gayle Rubin's (1992, 469) assertion that the "most commonly recognized butch styles are those based on these models of white, working-class" masculinity. White, working-class masculinity manifests itself in other forms in *Stone Butch Blues*. An important part of Jess Goldberg's life is the pleasure derived from owning, working on, and riding a motorcycle: "I finally felt really free. I'm so excited. I love that bike. I actually love it. I love that bike so much I can't even explain it." Its centrality to Goldberg's gendered identity is highlighted by the response of the other butches to this exhilarating declaration of pleasure the bike provides: "All the butches who rode motorcycles nodded to themselves ... Jan said 'Meg, set up another one for young Marlon Brando here'" (Feinberg 1993, 52).

Again, Rubin writes (1992, 469),

The iconography in many contemporary lesbian periodicals leaves a strong impression that a butch always has very short hair, wears a leather jacket, rides a Harley, and works construction. This butch paragon speaks mostly in monosyllables, is tough yet sensitive, is irresistible to women, and is semiotically related to a long line of images of young, rebellious, sexy, white, working-class masculinity that stretches from Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* to the character of James Hurley on *Twin Peaks*.

In the object of the bike, in the invocation of Brando, and in the locations of labor and leisure, class structures the content and experience of gender in Feinberg's novel. As a result, these gender performances destabilize the fantasy of a coherent and bound "male" by demonstrating the difference radiating through the category as a result of class and by exposing the radical permeability and contingency of the boundary around maleness itself.

And the reverse holds as well, in that Goldberg's experience organizing and participating in the union movement (which is central to Goldberg's radicalization in the novel) brings out divisions and differences that push against the stable Marxian subject of the "working class." During a union campaign, one of the chief organizers, Duffy, seeks to quell gendered difference in the name of class: "The company will do anything to split us up right now to make it harder for us to strike if we have to. We need to stick together." To which Goldberg replies: "Look Duffy, I'm for the union, you know that. But butches can't even come to union meetings" (Feinberg 1993, 83). During an especially contentious battle within the rank and file of the union,

13. Goldberg's femme girlfriend, Theresa, also enacts a sexed and gendered identity through the type of labor she performs. The year is 1968, and she is working one of the quintessentially gendered jobs of that epoch: secretary at the local university.

Duffy shouts in defense of Goldberg to one of the men hostile to the butches: “She’s a better union man than you are Boney!” (85). The union strives for unity but can only achieve this (at that time) through the suppression of any gendered difference. Yet the production of the specific gendered formation in question is made possible, in part, only through the very act of participating in a masculinized working-class organization such as the union. Again, the politics of sexuality, gender, and class are interrelated, each working through the other, and yet at the same time that relationship is marked by heightened tensions always in danger of snapping to form new antagonisms. Out of this we can begin to see the open processes and contingent practices that both render identities legible and also create the space and material for acts of passing. In a world of totalized social construction and scientific prediction there would be no space for “passing.”

The shifting and negotiated linkages between sexuality, gender, and class become more apparent as the narrative of *Stone Butch Blues* unfolds. During the recessions and subsequent deep levels of unemployment in the national economy of the 1970s, the economic positions through which butchness is performed began to disappear:

“This is a real crisis,” Grant stressed. “We either got to change how we look or we’re gonna starve to death! Katie got some wigs and some makeup. There’s a few jobs, like in the department stores. Jesus, I don’t know about you, but I need work. It’s only for a while, until the plants reopen.” Katie and Theresa retreated to the kitchen. Four stone butches trying on fashion wigs. It was like Halloween, only it was painful and creepy. (Feinberg 1993, 143)

As well, new articulations and critiques of gender emerge from other sectors of the nascent gay, lesbian, and radical feminist communities. Specifically, butch and femme identities become suspect categories. This critique of butch/femme is, at least in part, a class-infused critique: Jess Goldberg comes home one day and finds his/her girlfriend Theresa “stewing in anger” because “some of the lesbians from a newly formed group on campus had mocked her for being femme. They told her she was brainwashed...that butches were male chauvinist pigs!” (135). A new power bloc emerged from the primarily middle- to upper-middle-class confines of the university, set against the culture of the factory workers, the secretaries, the hustlers, and the working-class bars. These twin movements—the deindustrialization of the economy and the emergence of a new university-based lesbian/feminist contingent—created new normative forms of sexed and gendered being in the world. New modes of being, for example, that now included butch-but relationships. Frankie and Johnny, who had worked together previously at a union job with Goldberg, become lovers, and this butch-but love leaves Goldberg initially quite confused: “The more I thought about the two of them being lovers, the more it upset me... two gay guys would be alright. But two butches? How could they be attracted to each other? Who was the femme in bed?” (202).

To what extent would such transformations have been possible in the ordering of desire and the enactment of genders had not the economy constricted while manufacturing went global? If unions had not retreated at work at the same time women advanced in education? Or if a new feminist politics had not vibrantly burst forth

along with a gay liberation movement that withstood state repression and social exclusion? And without any reductionism, how might these questions—of class and sexuality, of gender and economy, of race and place—be linked and considered together in literary readings, historical understandings, and new political imaginaries?

The documentary *The Brandon Teena Story* does not directly address these questions, but the film implicitly offers a striking form of queered class commentary (Muska and Olafsdóttir 1998). The film documents the life and death of Brandon (1972–1993), who was designated as female at birth but eventually “passed” and identified as a man.<sup>14</sup> Brandon lived and died in rural Nebraska. His girlfriend, Lana Tisdel, described him as a typical man in that community. Brandon drank beer, played pool in the bars, wore football jerseys, and would “sit around and talk about cars like men do.” After Brandon was arrested for allegedly forging checks, the sheriff discovered that Brandon had been assigned the female gender at birth, and the sheriff began to inform girls in the small town that “he was a she.” The police policed gender. John Lotter and Tom Nissen, who had been mutual friends of Brandon and Lana, became increasingly insistent that either Brandon “prove” or Lana confirm that Brandon was a man. Upon their discovery—itsself borne of a humiliating assault—of what they viewed as Brandon’s “passing,” Lotter and Nissen kidnapped, beat, and raped Brandon. Days later, they murdered Brandon and two of his friends (Phillip DeVine and Lisa Lambert) in an attempt to prevent Brandon from testifying about the beating and the rape.

The documentary is set in the towns where Brandon lived in rural Nebraska. It is an overwhelmingly white, working-class world. The town of Falls City, Nebraska, where Brandon met those who would later rob him of his life, is introduced in the film by the one who took his life, John Lotter. Lotter describes the community as being poor and “full of people on welfare.” In stark contrast to the racist iconography of the African American “welfare queen” in American political discourse, the film immediately shifts the lens from Lotter to images of poor whites in a sequence of menacing slow-motion shots of a car derby in the mud and of trailer parks set against bleak horizons. As Jack Halberstam (2005, 26) notes,<sup>15</sup> the impoverished rural landscape “takes on the role and the presence of a character in this drama.”

It is a frightening character. The film deploys an exceptionally exploitative and degrading interview style and depicts the people of the town as socioeconomic circus freaks; the film veers into something like class porn. The interviewees often appear after a visual survey of the town’s economic landscape and are often interviewed in unflattering lighting, wearing T-shirts, smoking cigarettes, and sitting next to glasses of beer. All collapse into one: the welfare stigma, the violence, the white poverty, the ruralness of the place. The film utterly ignores that this is the milieu of the protagonist, Brandon Teena. It fails to understand that the class position/rural location has a concrete connection not just to Brandon’s death but also to Brandon’s life. The filmmakers describe their documentary as a “horrific tale of prejudice and hatred in America’s heartland” (Muska and Olafsdóttir 1998). But this move insinuates the possibility of understanding Brandon as something other than a member of this so-

14. Brandon’s story also served as the basis for the film *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999).

15. Published as Judith Halberstam.

called heartland, and this will not do because the symbols and codes and practices of this life—the mullet haircuts, the beer drinking, the pool halls, the pickup trucks—are what Brandon sought to *inhabit*, not flee.

As Halberstam (2005, 27) has argued, Brandon's story actually "reveal[s] the desire shared by many Midwestern queers for a way of staying rather than of leaving."<sup>16</sup> But the film's perspective disagrees with this conclusion. Its worldview is best captured in a scene from the trial of Lotter and Nissen. Activist, artist, and "gender outlaw" Kate Bornstein arrives in town to protest outside the courthouse.<sup>17</sup> Bornstein recounts a personal experience of abuse and subsequent escape: "I moved to San Francisco and Seattle. It is a lot easier. You forget about this stuff." So it is only by imagining a queer community entirely through the lens of those living in major urban centers that one can create the narrative of this documentary.<sup>18</sup> We as viewers are pressed into hoping that Brandon escapes (perhaps as Bornstein did) not just the violence but also the socioeconomic world that he lives in, and this through a storytelling that renders the violence as indistinguishable from—and as the inevitable product of—that socioeconomic world. In imagining the existence of a (trans)gender politics necessarily distinct from a particular class position, we are led to ignore the radical levels of class stratification, gentrification, unemployment, necessity-driven sex work, and homelessness that shape the queer community in the oases of coastal urban "tolerance." And thus the film is an act of class war on two fronts: it degrades the impoverished in the heartland while it erases them in the queer metropolis.

#### 4

Sex, sexuality, gender, and race crack the unity of class analysis; class relations and class power return the favor. It is in these cracks that politicized identity is forged and lived, and it is here that the act of passing must be located. Here there can be no operational unities or impermeable boundaries or singular political visions. There thus exists no possibility of issuing a general edict or of crafting a theoretical rule on the queer politics of passing. To read passing as either transgressive or reactionary, absent of a concrete engagement with historically and culturally specific moments and acts of passing, is likewise not possible. And that concrete engagement will not be complete without a thoroughgoing engagement with material conditions and the

16. A disagreement I have with Halberstam (2005, 28) involves the claim that Brandon's self-presentation was in fact a "damaging critique of the white working-class masculinities around him." That Brandon was seen as a "dream" to many of the women he dated renders his masculinity "middle-class and so-called respectable" *only* if working-class masculinity is rendered as nightmarish per se. Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* serves as a nice rebuttal to this conceit. Nonetheless, Halberstam does provide an illuminating analysis of the relationship between race, space, queerness, and class (especially see 22-46).

17. See Bornstein (1994).

18. In *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*, Scott Herring (2010, 4, 5) explores how contemporary queer politics problematically places the metropolis as "the final destination point for queer kids of any gender, class, race, or region" and how with this "the rural becomes a slur." Herring offers a critique, what he calls "narratological metronormativity" (15).

classes constituted in relation to those conditions. Class politics thus stands not in opposition to identity politics but rather is always already implicated in any articulation of politicized identity. Our queer bodies cannot escape from capitalist political economy and culture, and thus neither can our queer politics.

At the same time, queer politics almost always transgresses the bounds of any Marxist rendering of politics, for however much material conditions undergird cultural life, queer cultural politics establishes new collectivities of bodies, pleasures, and powers that are politically generative of new realities in the world. Against tendencies toward reduction and abolition stands a desire for increasing the multiplicity of classes and cultures in tandem with a desire for intensifying the pleasures derived from processes of hybridity and mobility. This too is a queerness illuminated in passing, and it raises a question: can dominations be fully emptied of their force without divesting difference of its delights? Intersectional political theory and social analysis have, in general, avoided this question by avoiding class, capital, and the legacy of Marxism. Marxist theory has, historically, presumed the answer to be "no," either by evading queer politics or by a theoretical expulsion of queer politics into the realm of bourgeois culture. The queer class politics of passing should both disrupt the systemic omissions of intersectionality and also disturb the particular politics of freedom born of the Marxist tradition.

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